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SUBJECT: UNSC: GAZA SITUATION UNDERMINING ANNAPOLIS OPTIMISM

REF: STATE 18360

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Recently appointed UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Serry and UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Holmes provided

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the Security Council on February 26 with a detailed description of the situation in the Palestinian territories, arguing that dire conditions on the ground are undermining the optimism generated by the launch of the Annapolis process. The Israeli delegation purposely absented itself from the open briefing to show Israel's opposition to these UN statements, including assertions that Israeli measures amount to collective punishment and an appeal to Israel to abide by its obligations under international law.

¶2. (SBU) In closed consultations following the briefing, Council members agreed the situation on the ground threatened the Annapolis process. All delegations except Libya condemned rocket attacks and suicide bombings. While asserting Israel's right to self-defense, most including the Europeans called on Israel to respond proportionately in accordance with international law, and also called for the reopening of the Gaza crossings. In response to an appeal by Holmes for the Council "to speak up," several delegations lamented the Council's silence on the subject. Many expressed support for a more active Quartet role. In his remarks, Ambassador Khalilzad cited the four elements necessary for a solution to the situation in Gaza (reftel), and recalled the Council's failure last month to reach a balanced statement. Although most delegations withheld comments on Lebanon pending upcoming UN reports, the Russian, UK, French, Italian, and Chinese delegations noted their support for the Arab League's mediation efforts. END SUMMARY.

UN REPRESENTATIVES EMPHASIZE DIRE CONDITIONS

¶3. (SBU) UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry briefed the Council for the first time on February 26. Serry emphasized that the Annapolis process could only progress if there were real changes on the ground.

He called for an intensification of efforts in the West Bank in accordance with the Road Map and for a different and more positive strategy to address the situation in Gaza, which he called "unacceptable and unsustainable." He urged Israel to meet its obligations to the civilians of Gaza under international law, but also noted that Hamas had not acted sufficiently to end the rocket and mortar attacks against Israel. In closed consultations with Council members, Serry said he plans to update the Council regularly and expects to play an active role in the Quartet.

¶4. (SBU) Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and

Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes briefed the Council on his recent trip to the West Bank, Gaza, and Sderot. He focused his remarks on the "grim and miserable" situation in Gaza. He said only 10 percent of the goods and people that had gone into Gaza in January 2007 was allowed to enter in January 2008, and he noted that 80 percent of the population was receiving food aid. He also said that most industry and agriculture had collapsed, power cuts were impairing the functioning of essential services and infrastructure, water quality was declining, the sewage system was inadequate, and the medical and education systems were approaching failure. Holmes made clear that Hamas must accept its full responsibility for the situation, but said no matter the provocation and illegality of terrorist acts, the Israeli response amounts to collective punishment and is contrary to international humanitarian law. He further argued that the Israeli response is not having the desired effect, but leading to further radicalization. In closing, he called for the reopening of the Gaza crossings and appealed to the Council to speak up about the impact of the situation on civilians.

15. (SBU) Israel purposely did not attend the briefing to signal its disagreement with the content of the UN statements. The Israeli mission informed USUN that Israeli PermRep Gillerman met with Serry on February 25 and told him that the Israeli response to the rocket and mortar attacks is not targeted against civilians per se, but driven by security concerns. Gillerman said the recent drop in the number of Qassam rockets fired into Israel showed the measures were effective.

UNSC: HUMANITARIAN SITUATION UNDERMINING ANNAPOLIS PROGRESS

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16. (SBU) In closed consultations following the briefing, Ambassador Khalilzad reiterated the U.S. commitment to the Annapolis process and its support for progress on four tracks. He also welcomed the dialogue between Egypt, Israel and the Palestinians on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and outlined four elements necessary for a solution (reftel).

In response to calls for Council action, Ambassador Khalilzad raised last month's failed efforts to reach consensus on a balanced statement.

17. (SBU) Delegations noted the growing gap between the aspirations of the political process and the reality on the ground, and said the dire humanitarian situation was undermining the optimism generated by the Annapolis process. All delegations except Libya condemned the rocket and other attacks against Israel, but also objected to what was characterized as Israel's disproportionate response. Libyan PR Ettalhi questioned Israeli actions, asking if it is possible to say that Israel has a desire for peace. All delegations called on both parties to fulfill their Roadmap obligations. The UN's appeal for the Gaza crossings to be re-opened was supported by the UK, Belgium, France, Russia, China, South Africa, and Costa Rica.

MEMBERS DISAPPOINTED BY UNSC INACTION

18. (SBU) In reaction to Holmes' call for the Council to speak up, several elected delegations expressed disappointment at the Council's failure to issue a statement on the situation in Gaza, and the delegations from South Africa, Costa Rica, and Panama spoke out strongly against Council inaction on this file. Panamanian PR Arias blamed the inaction on "some members'" unconditional support for the parties. South African PR Kumalo contested Ambassador Khalilzad's statement that the Council had made every effort to issue a statement in January, arguing that the Council would never come to

agreement if it was expected to equate the rocket attacks against Israel with the humanitarian plight of the Palestinians. Kumalo also urged the Council to visit the area to demonstrate its concern to the international community. In seeking a greater Council role, Kumalo and Costa Rican PR Urbina also criticized the Quartet for failure to fully engage the Council on its activities.

SUPPORT FOR ARAB LEAGUE EFFORTS IN LEBANON

¶9. (SBU) Given the focus of the statements by Serry and Holmes, most delegations said they would wait for the UN's upcoming reports on Lebanon before speaking to the issue, but the UK, Russian, French, Italian, Chinese delegations voiced their support for the Arab League's mediation efforts.

KHALILZAD